

GEORGE LUKS



AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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GEORGE LUKS

BY

ELISABETH LUTHER CARY



AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

TEN WEST EIGHTH STREET • NEW YORK

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*Publication of the books entitled
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ALLEN TUCKER has been postponed.
These volumes will appear in 1932.*

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FOREWORD

THIS book is one of a series devoted to the work of various American artists and is published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, founded by Gertrude V. Whitney. The purpose of these books, like that of the Museum which sponsors them, is to promote a wider knowledge and appreciation of the best in American art.

For assistance in preparing this volume for publication, we wish gratefully to acknowledge our indebtedness to the Kraushaar Galleries and the Frank K. M. Rehn Galleries for information regarding paintings used for illustration, to The Arts magazine for the loan of its files of photographs, and to the museums and private collectors whose paintings, reproduced in this book, add so notably to the value of the illustrations.

JULIANA R. FORCE, *Director*
Whitney Museum of American Art



Photograph by Arnold Genthe

GEORGE LUSK

GEORGE LUKS

BY

ELISABETH LUTHER CARY

A QUARTER of a century ago the "tonalists," as they were called by critics and commentators (to a man those to whom the name was applied detested it), were opposed in the exhibition galleries by the young school of "individualists." This title like the other was only a label with none too much of significance. As individualists the young school presented a remarkably solid front to the academic world; it is well enough known that there is nothing like independence of one another to tie people together with the result that united they stand.

The academies, however, seem to have been fairly receptive. In 1908, George Bellows, one of the youngest and most aggressive of the independent group and only twenty-six years old at the time, was elected associate member of the National Academy of Design, and his *Pennsylvania, Excavation* and *The Stag at Sharkey's* were in its winter exhibition of that year and later were shown at the exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy. The older individualists, Henri, Sloan, Glackens, were all well known to academy visitors, and, although frequently manhandled by the more timid or conservative writers on art, had plenty of support from those of fresher vision.

All these artists were primarily interested in the world at their door, and especially in that humbler world which from century to century has had its great moments in the studios of artists. The humble world as it was brought to the attention of the exhibition public in this case was a cheerful world, energetic, interesting, and without sentimentality. The young artists painted it in strong colors and with a salience that thrust it into the consciousness of the onlooker with such force as to threaten the milder art of their forerunners with something like effacement when seen adjacent to it.

Against this bright yet curiously mellow background the figure of George Luks is clearly distinguishable as with it but not of it. As bold as the rest in attacking contemporary material, as vital in color, as salient in style, he nevertheless withdraws slightly toward a more personal and sheltered point of vantage whence may be seen that which need not be shared with everyone. To many it will seem the height of absurdity to attach to him the well-worn potent phrase "caviare to the general," yet to no one of his time does it more suggestively apply. By virtue of this, among his gifted contemporaries he is most truly the individualist.

The same year that saw George Bellows taken into the Academy a small special exhibition of contemporary art was put on at the National Arts Club. Here were the good companions, Sloan and Glackens and Henri and Shinn, varied, unhackneyed, resonant, and here, very especially, was Luks. In the close harmonies of Henri, in the bold generalizations of Glackens, lurked reminiscences of Whistler and Manet. In the contributions of Luks were reminiscences only of himself. Not very high in key, some of them almost grey in tone, none of them strongly aggressive in rendering, these contributions made an unforgettable impression. After more than twenty years you may call them from the vasty deep where lie buried thousands upon thousands of visual memories—you may call them, and the miracle is that they will come.

The beautiful picture *The Spielers* was there; two children dancing in the street, the color warm, bright bodices, dingy skirts, boots down at heel, mouths distended in the unbridled laughter that from time immemorial has heralded youth, red hair and yellow hair flying, and all about these joyous dancers, embracing them, caressing them, shifting away from them, a dim floating atmosphere lending to the total effect a mystery not to be found in the work of the other men.

There, also, were *The Waifs* and *The Little Grey Girl*, huddled on the curb or in a doorway, drifting through a sodden mist, no childish gaiety of spirit to communicate, sensitive notations of youth forlorn in

poverty. For contrast we had *The London Bus Driver*, florid, assertive, rakish, friendly, and no more free than the others from the pressure of his cosmopolitan background. In this jovial symbol of a now vanished London, the artist's style was enriched by his instinctive sympathy with "powerful uneducated persons," a vast brood hovering unseen behind this picturesque representative and lending mass support to his image; a brood to which Luks never has become indifferent.

Thus the fused impression of these paintings seen so long ago, an impression possessing all the sharp clarity of a first time, was that of a strong personality working its way through the difficulties of an exacting medium to the expression of a depth of sympathy with the subject rare among artists of any time, and especially rare in those of the twentieth century, if one may judge—as one should not—from the careful suppression of sentiment of any kind in most of the modern work. The manner tied itself closely to the mood interpreted. Innocently gay, pitiously miserable, lusty and coarse, whatever the subject dictated the art provided.

Oddly, since technical efficiency at that time seemed to the observer the most important thing in the world, the remembered characteristics of the paintings at the National Arts Club include no technical clue to their place in the history of craftsmanship, no positive impression of space-design, arabesque or volume. In the stead of these comes a rather pale conviction that the modelling in *The London Bus Driver* was solid, a full assurance that the color everywhere was vital, and a happy sense that loose swift brushstrokes gave ample chance for life to enter the work and therein breathe easily. Later the remarkable distinction of that bold fluent virtuosity claimed its due. It became easy to see that beneath its breezy freshness lay authority.

What actually clung to the mind, however, was not the casket of style but its precious content, which perhaps gives us more directly than anything else could the important information that the two were indissol-

able. The things seen conveyed clear intimations of a penetrating vision that could make its way through the obvious surface of a subject to that inner world of related experiences and influences with their resulting emotions so largely ignored in the art of today. This ability to grasp the hidden emotional subtleties of a subject has been called sentimentality by critics with a liking for the stark. Others more friendly have called it mysticism. It may not be either. Perhaps the best we can do is to compare it to the extreme refinement of a physical sense, such as tells an experienced woodsman the direction to take to reach a savory meal already cooking over an open fire, so far distant that men from cities fail to distinguish the slightest difference in the flavor of the air.

Whatever it is, it has persisted through these later years, becoming, however, less openly displayed, sinking deeper into a more compact, less casual craftsmanship. Those who have watched the science of this masterly late craftsmanship develop and finally gain control of the effect, may have yearned occasionally, and perversely, for a glimpse of the old careless rapture of free impatient brushstrokes from which rushed out to us an emotion now restrained to a finer poise, a more deliberate dignity, the truly grand manner of richly endowed maturity. Even so, it must be clear to all that this great talent has flowered to its fulfilment in the orderly fashion of nature.

It would not have been a great talent had its course been perfectly regular and even, and the fluctuations marking it are what should be expected. From the period of the war we glean a Red Cross nurse formed in so precise a mould of patriotic idealism as almost to conceal the actual authorship. From a visit to the mines of Pennsylvania we gain a series of characterizations instinct with the artist's enthusiasm for this new subject matter and admirable as illustration, but only here and there, notably in the *Breaker Boy*, unmistakably the work of Luks. The high peaks of achievement, on the other hand, although differing almost unbelievably in subject, method and mood, one from another, are each and all

authentic specimens which could not by the dullest observer be ascribed to any other brush.

Here is *The Dominican*, safely placed with its peers in the superb Duncan Phillips Collection at Washington, a portrait as magisterial, as incisive and discerning as any in the long line of prelates stretching back to the sixteenth century, and in the same collection we find the subtle reading of Otis Skinner in the rôle of Colonel Philippe Bridau, a composition in which the strong diagonal of the cane plays a brilliant part in supporting and counteracting the easy swagger of the pose; here also is one of the series of old women which alone would serve the artist as a passport to fame. To think of these three as offspring of the same mental attitude toward art is only less impossible than to think of any one of them as coming from another hand.

In an exhibition given in New York early in 1931 were shown three other examples again differing sharply each from the others. One was the *Mrs. Gamely*, another old woman of the celebrated series. She represents the latest phase of their rendering, a phase in which the finest workmanship is lavished upon the undiluted physical ugliness of age, and in which this ugliness is transmuted into beauty by an aesthetic vision and triumphant skill. Holding a haughty lord of the poultry yard in her comfortable embrace, Mrs. Gamely stands in smiling, self-possession, conscious mistress of her tidy kitchen, a figure massive and immutable, not a single superfluous detail detracting from the solid dignity of her aspect. The second of the trio was *Ann Pratt*, so true to a strongly accentuated personality eloquent of shrewd sophistication, as to verge upon the surcharged truth of caricature. The third is an intimate view of a shaving scene, inexpressibly amusing, yet without a trace of irony, without a trace of that superiority to the subject which writes down the inferiority of the artist. This is the final word upon which we may close: to all the subjects of his art, multitudinous and various as they are, George Luks is a friend and a gentleman.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

GEORGE LUKS was born in Williamsport, Pa., August 13th, 1867, of American parentage. He commenced his education in art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pa. Later he continued his studies in Dusseldorf Academy, Germany, and in London and Paris. During the Spanish-American War he served as correspondent and artist for the *Philadelphia Bulletin*.

He has lived for a number of years in New York City and is a member of the National Association of Portrait Painters and the Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers.

His paintings have been shown in all the principal national and international exhibitions and have been accorded the following honors: Temple Gold Medal, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pa.; Logan Medal, Chicago Art Institute, Chicago, Ill.; Hudnut Water Color Prize, New York, N. Y.; Corcoran Art Gallery Prize, Washington, D. C.; Gold Medal, Locust Club, Philadelphia, Pa.

He is represented in many private collections and in the following public institutions: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N. Y.; Milwaukee Art Institute, Milwaukee, Wis.; Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Mich.; Cleveland Museum, Cleveland, Ohio; Collection of Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison, Los Angeles Museum of Art, Los Angeles, Calif.; Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C.; New York Public Library, New York, N. Y.; Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pa.; Public Library, Pottsville, Pa.; mural paintings, Neco Allen Hotel, Pottsville, Pa.; Addison Gallery, Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass.; Ferdinand Howald Collection, Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Columbus, Ohio; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N. Y.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

MRS. GAMELY, 1930

h. 69 inches w. 48 inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art



CLOWN, 1929

h. 24 inches w. 20 inches

Collection of Mr. John T. Spaulding, Boston



PETER FRIESE, 1928
H. 59 inches W. $47\frac{1}{2}$ inches



ANN PRATT
H. 60 inches W. 40 inches



ELEANOR, 1927
h. 30 inches w. 25 inches



OLD WOMAN WITH WHITE PITCHER, 1926

h. 30 inches w. 25 inches

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Lesley G. Sheaffer, New York



THE MINER, 1925
h. 60 inches w. 51 inches



MORNING LIGHT, 1928

h. 60 inches w. 48 inches



SATURDAY NIGHT, 1925

h. 42 inches w. 34 inches



BULLFINCH HOUSES, BEACON HILL

BOSTON, 1923

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Q. A. Shaw McKean, Boston



THE DOMINICAN, 1918

h. 56 inches w. 49 inches

*Collection of Phillips Memorial Gallery
Washington, D. C.*



MOUNT VERNON STREET, BOSTON, 1923

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Q. A. Shaw McKean, Boston



WOMAN WITH BOUQUET, 1918

H. 36 inches W. 26 inches

Collection of The Kraushaar Gallery, New York



COMMONWEALTH AVENUE, BOSTON, 1922

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Q. A. Shaw McKean, Boston



Queen's Park

THE WRESTLERS, 1905
h. 48 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches w. 66 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches

Collection of The Kraushaar Gallery, New York



THE SPIELERS, 1905

h. 36 inches w. 25 inches

*Collection of Addison Gallery, Phillips Academy
Andover, Mass.*



Geo B / OKS / 1905

THE GUITAR, 1908
Collection of Mr. Arthur F. Egner
South Orange, N. J.



LITTLE MADONNA, 1905

h. 27 inches w. 22 inches

*Collection of Addison Gallery, Phillips Academy
Andover, Mass.*



EAST SIDE DOCKS, 1905

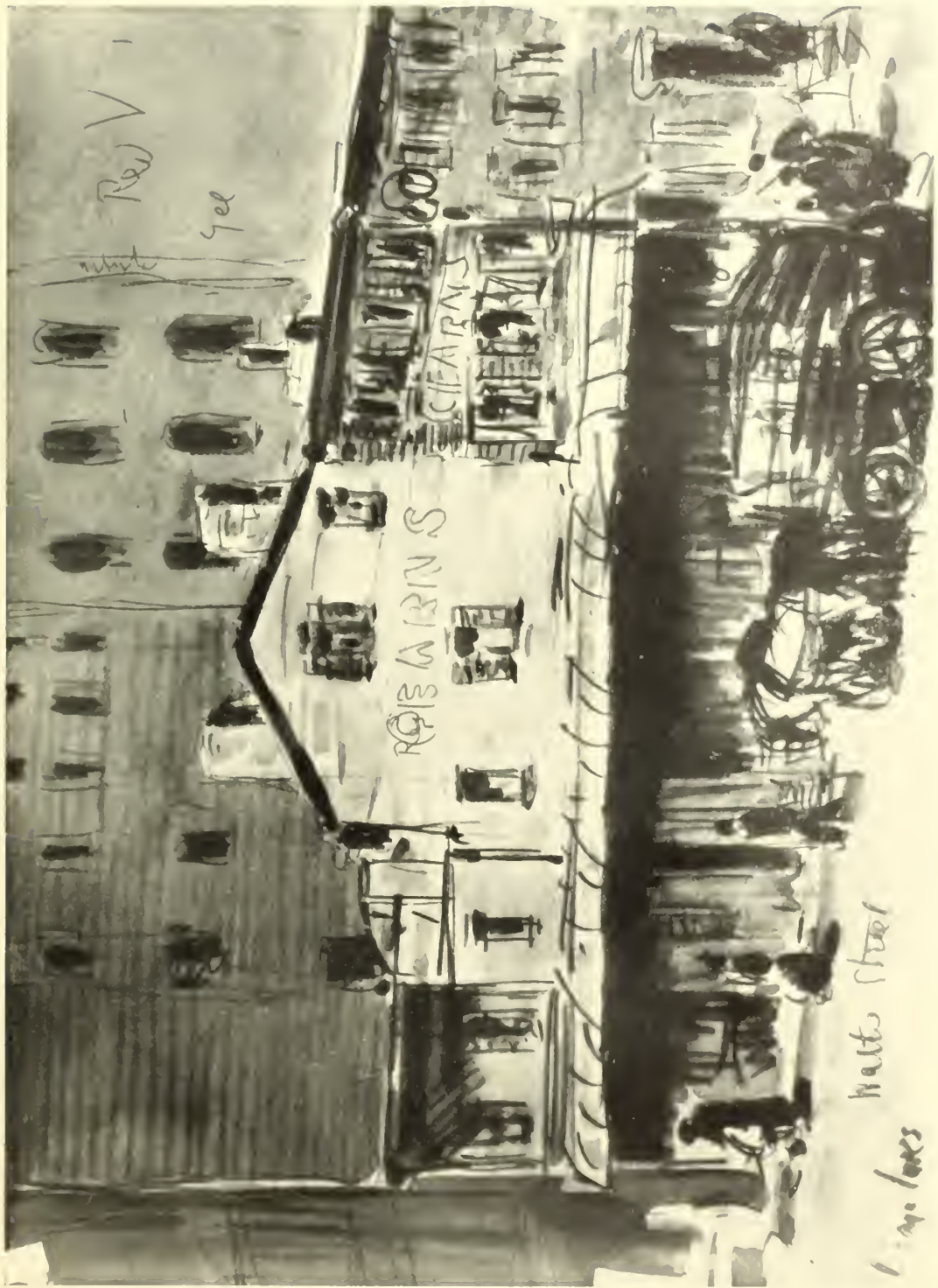
*Collection of Mr. Arthur F. Egner
South Orange, N. J.*



WATTS STREET 1924

h. $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches w. $9\frac{3}{4}$ inches

Collection of Mr. Albert Lowenfels, White Plains, N.Y.



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